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ABSTRACT

Communication competency research and theory would benefit from a conceptualization that emphasizes competent communication rather than competent communicators. Such a conceptualization recognizes that competent communication is inherently both contextually bound and necessarily dependent upon the particular combination of people involved in an exchange. Important to emphasizing the role of the situation in competent communication is the identification of both the major underlying contextual dimensions of social encounters and the situation and characteristics of the other interactants. Certain sorts of people mesh best in some settings. Some contextual dimensions enhance the meshing; others detract from it. Competency assessments of communication, if they are to be made, then would need to be empirically derived standards for situations using a typology of both contextual dimensions and person by person interactions. Competence is not an individual level variable--rather it is a dyadic construct framed within some context. Therefore it is essentially meaningless to talk of a competent communicator; instead one needs to address what it is that makes for competent communication. (HOD)

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MOVING BEYOND THE PERSON: BROADENING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE TO COMPETENT COMMUNICATION

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Many communication scholars have focused on identifying and assessing people's competencies in social and public oral discourse. Current research programs, and the associated conceptualizations, emphasizing competency are sorely limited in their purview: the vast majority of thinking construes competency as an **individual difference** or **individual skill**. This individual differences perspective brings with it many of the typical assumptions underlying personality traits: people are assumed to demonstrate their competency in relatively consistent and coherent ways, are roughly rankable along various competency continua, and will remain in their relative positions along those continua unless intentionally modified through some external intervention.

While practical as a pedagogical tool, and useful as a starting point for research, the dispositional paradigm ignores many potentially important considerations. Because of its restricted concentration on the person, the dispositional model precludes careful consideration of a number of important conceptual issues. Communication competency research and theory would benefit from a broader conceptualization. This broader conceptualization emphasizes **competent communication** rather than **competent communicators**. Scholarship should focus on what it takes to have a competent interaction. In taking this approach,

the goal of research and theory would be the specification of the characteristics of conversations that are, by some standard, considered highly competent and contrast these with exchanges that are less than entirely competent[1]. Among other things, thir broader conceptualization recognizes that competent communication is inherently both contextually bound and necessarily dependent upon the particular combination of people involved in the excnange[2].

Competence as contextual

A person is likely to perform competently in some settings and offer less competent enactments in others. Its unreasonable to assume that a person's communication capabilities and performances are constant across different settings. Characteristics of a situation impact on the effectiveness of people's interaction behaviors within that setting. For instance, a teacher may exhibit highly competent behaviors in a classroom but fail to demonstrate anything close to competent behaviors in a social setting very different from the classroom.

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[1] The topic I am addressing cuts across dyadic, group, and public oral communication. For purposes of explication I will not distinguish among levels in this paper

[2] Until the final portions of this paper I will use competence and performance interchangeably. The distinction is a useful one in this conceptualization but is not necessary for explicating the major points I make in this paper.

Current conceptualizations of communication competence often fail to incorporate context into their formulations aside from the rather platitudinous suggestion that a competent person must be able to adjust to various situational contingencies. That is insufficient. Adjustment per se, to a situation, is only part of the issue. Certain situational characteristics may act to enhance, and even insure, a successful performance while other characteristics may actually, sometimes almost by definition, preclude success.

One important step in emphasizing the role of the situation in competent communication is identifying the major underlying contextual dimensions of social encounters. Some research (e.g., Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 1981) offers potential directions for the identification of contextual characteristics that may impact on the successful enactment of a communication event. Forgas, in a series of studies (1976, 1978, 1979, 1981), has described some of the underlying dimensions of social episodes (e.g., anxiety, evaluation, involvement, socioemotional). Wish and his colleagues (1976, 1977) have proposed five basic dimensions undergirding communication encounters (equal-unequal, intense-superficial, cooperative-competitive, formal-informal, socio-emotional-task-oriented). Beyond these dimensional studies, there is a wealth of theory and research suggesting how different characteristics of tasks and environments affect enactments of social intercourse. For

instance, considerable research in psychology on topics such as social facilitation, altruism, social comparison, audience size, and normative expectancies, among others, have yielded clear evidence that context impacts on social behavior. Further, in communication, situational variables such as novelty, evaluation, conspicuousness, ambiguity, and a melange of environmental characteristics affect how well communication encounter occurs (Daly & Buss, 1984).

Most previous work on communication competence has operated in a context free, virtually sterile environment devoid of any serious consideration of how situational parameters affect the competent enactment of communication. Rather than asking whether an individual is or is not competent in communication it is more appropriate to probe what it is about a particular setting that enhances or detracts from the communication. What can people do to shape situations so that it works for the betterment of their conversation? what situation parameters are salient predictors of successful interactions? Which ones aren't? And under what conditions? Context, as it relates to competent interaction, needs much work.

Competence as other dependent

Regardless of people's dispositional communication competencies, and the contextual constraints under which they must interact, they sometimes experience successful exchanges

and, in other instances, miserable ones. Some conversations seem to "click," speakers occasionally feel as if one with their audiences, and some groups seem to synergistically meld creating an exchange far better than expected by each member's individual competence or contributions. The critical variable in these cases is not the competence of the individual interactant, rather, it is the degree to which the participants successfully mesh. In essence, competent communication depends upon the nature and characteristics of the entire group of involved interactants. In an encounter, communication competence is a property of the various combinatory groups composing the exchange. Very simply, competent communication is an outcome of the blending of people involved in a social interaction.

Bodies of literature related to communication, but found in other disciplines, bolster this move away from a person centered approach to a more interactive paradigm for conceptualizing communication competence. For instance, leadership researchers dismiss notions that construe leadership as an individual characteristic. Rather, a leader is tied individually to each follower. Thus, leaders may have positive relationships with some followers and negative ones with others. Leadership depends upon followership. One without the other isn't meaningful. Investigators interested in relational communication opt for a similar move. The couple is the critical unit. The two people composing the relationship are not, individually,

particularly central to an understanding of the interaction patterns of the couple. Lacking an understanding of the ways individuals mesh, one knows little about a relationship. Therapeutically, it is often futile to treat only one member of a relationship. The couple needs the relational work, not the individuals. Along like grounds, scholars interested in the properties of conversations posit that a successful exchange requires the active participation of all members. The nature of the exchange is determined by the "jointedness" and cooperation of the interactants, not the individuals' particular competencies.

Clearly, dispositions, the situation, and the characteristics of the other interactants present at the time need to be considered together in understanding competent communication. Certain sorts of people mesh best together in some settings. Some conversationalists have clear affinity with others of a particular ilk. Some contextual dimensions enhances the mesning; others detract from it. An analogue to a three factor analysis of variance may help explicate this conceptualization. The factors are: (1) the context, (2) Interactant A, and (3) Interactant B. This conceptualization argues that the important variance lies in the interaction among the three factors. The

critical dependent outcome is competent communication[3]. The important (and indeed large portion of) variance should, according to this formulation, appear in the interaction terms.

Implications

Moving from a primarily dispositional model of communication competency to a contextually framed, dyadic or interactive one, raises a number of important issues and intriguing questions. For instance, a conversationalist's personal characteristics and competencies are not considered especially critical apart from the characteristics of the others involved in the exchange, the setting characteristics, and the various interactions among participants and contextual dimensions. Do certain partnerships evolve to produce highly competent conversations? Do other dyads continuously clash, making interactions uncomfortable, unproductive, and in the end, incompetent? What predicts successful and unsuccessful

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[3] The manner in which competent communication is defined is left intentionally vague here. I suspect that terms like effectiveness and appropriateness would be reasonable. But, again, the criteria for these outcomes is shaped by both context and interactant mix. Some outcomes are impossible in some settings with some interactants. In other cases, unexpected outcomes may arise due to the mix of the people and setting that might, initially, not seem to achieve the prior goals of the conversationalists. It isn't the purpose of this discussion paper to outline a detailed model of what exactly what one would define as competent communication. That is a necessary future task---one worthy of discussion

conversations? What contextual characteristics enhance conversational competence and what ones limit the competence of the exchange? Research, within this conceptualization, will preface findings with phrases such as "competent dyads were..." and "the communication competency of the couple was enhanced by...."

Issues

Competence versus performance. A continuing issue in competence research is a distinction between communication competence and communication performance. Drawing from language analogies, competence has been represented as the knowledge an individual has of proper, appropriate communication behaviors. A competent communicator knows what he or she is suppose to do in an encounter. Performance, on the other hand, is the proper and appropriate enactment of the actual communication behaviors. The bifurcation, while interesting, has permitted a number of scholars interested in testing various notions about the topic to focus primarily on competence (knowledge) eschewing performance considerations. Tests can be constructed easily by asking people what they ought to do. Testing actual performance is more difficult because of various situational as well as

other-participant variables[4].

The approach emphasized in this paper still makes use of the distinction between competence and performance. Competence is the potential of the conversational group within some setting. Performance represents that actual enactment. At its core, performance is obviously the key concern. It is difficult to imagine competence tests for dyads framed within particular situational exigencies. Competency assessments of communication, if they are made, would need to be empirically derived standards for situations using a typology of both contextual dimensions and person by person interactions. Probabilistic predictions of successful interactions could be proferred on the bases of certain predictors drawn from the setting, the participants, the topic, and so on.

Skill improvement. One major consequence of the burgeoning interest on communication competency has been the development of

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[4] The lack of emphasis on optimal performance behaviors may have, at its core, part of the issue raised in this paper. Performance assessments, beyond very basic ones, demand a setting and other involved participants. I also have difficulty with the proliferation of self-report questionnaires for competence. To the extent that competence is a situation bound, interactive construct, the instruments that purportedly assess competence at the present time seem to be mostly measures of generalized communication self-esteem, not instruments assessing self-perceived competence or self-perceived performance.

skills programs to improve individuals' competencies as communicators. While relevant in this conceptualization, a skills approach is admittedly less central. One of the major points in this paper is that an individual may complete all of the available skills programs, score high on standardized tests, and even be evaluated positively by both self and observers, but yet in some settings, with some people, find their interaction less than entirely effective. Perhaps skills approaches emphasizes dyadic adjustment and prediction, as well as adaption to various situational contingencies, represent potential instructional objectives.

The underlying question that provoked this paper was why it is that the same person can experience the entire range of conversational successes and failures with another person over time. And, moreover, why it is that a person may be have one conversation go well in a particular setting and have another one go poorly in exactly the same environment. The paper's proposal is simple: competence is not an individual level variable---rather it is a dyadic construct framed within some context. It is essentially meaningless to talk of a competent communicator. Rather, we should address what it is that makes for competent communication.

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